

Torah Reading for the First Day of Rosh Hashanah

Bereishit Chapter 21

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This *parasha* encompasses the birth of Yitzchak, his weaning, the sending away of Yishmael and Hagar, the treaty with Avimelech, the king of the Plishtim and Avraham's planting of a grove and calling out the name of Hashem.

The reading opens with Hashem "remembering" Sarah פקד את שרה, the first of three barren women - Sarah, Rachel and Chana - whom the Rabbis tell us were "remembered" on Rosh Hashanah. The *haftara* for this day features Chana and the second day's *haftarah* mentions Rachel.

After Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth, Avraham names their child Yitzchak, meaning "He will laugh." The Hebrew root of this name, ק.ח.צ is the Hebrew root for laughter ק.ח.צ and it appears no less than 9 times throughout the course of this Torah reading. We will explore the significance of this word and what it means for Sarah, Avraham, Yishmael and Yitzchak and how we can find inspiration from these concepts today, and especially on Rosh Hashanah.

We read earlier, in Chapter 17, when Hashem told Avraham that he would have a son and name him Yitzchak, Avraham laughs:

Avraham threw himself on his face **and laughed**, as he said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?"

וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו
וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבִּי
הֲלֵבֵן מֵאָה שָׁנָה יֵלֵד
וְאִם-שָׂרָה הִבְתִּיתִּישְׁעִים
שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד:

And Avraham said to God, "O that Ishmael might live by Your favor!"

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-
הָאֱלֹהִים לוֹ יִשְׁמְעָאֵל
יְחִיָּה לְפָנֶיךָ:

G-d said, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him **Isaac**; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
אֲבָל שָׂרָה
אֲשֶׁתְּךָ יֵלֵד לְךָ
בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת-שְׁמוֹ
יִצְחָק וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-
בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית
עוֹלָם לְזָרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו:

(Note: This passage seems to foreshadow our Rosh Hashanah reading with the birth of Yitzchak and the sending away of Yishmael.)

More famously, Sarah also laughs when she hears the three angels tell Avraham that they would indeed have a child.

And Sarah **laughed to herself**, saying, "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?"

וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ
לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתִּי
הֲיִתְהַלְּלִי עִדְנָה וְאֵדְנִי
זָקוֹ:

Whereas Hashem seems to accept Avraham's laughter, He chastises Sarah for her laughter to Avraham:

Then the LORD said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'"

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-אַבְרָהָם
לָמָּה זֶה צָחֲקָה שָׂרָה
לֵאמֹר הֲאֵף אֲמַנָּם אֶלְד
וְאֲנִי זָקֵנָתִי:

This indicates a joyous laughter

וְחֵדִי

For Sarah he writes:

This indicates a mocking laughter or disbelief

וְחִכְתַּת שָׂרָה

Is anything too wondrous for the LORD? "I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

הֲיִפְלֵא מִה' דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד
אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כְּעֵת חַיָּה
וְלִשְׂרָה בֵן:

Now we can better understand why Hashem chastised Sarah and not Avraham for laughing at the news of a child at their advanced ages.

However, we are left with the question how Sarah could have denied the fact that she laughed, and to Hashem no less, the omniscient One!

Even more surprising is Sarah's denial of her laughter:

Sarah lied, saying, "I **did not laugh**," for she was frightened. But He replied, "**You did laugh**."

וּתְכַחַשׁ שָׂרָה | לֵאמֹר
לֹא צָחֲקִיתִי כִּי | יִרְאָה
וַיֹּאמֶר | לֹא כִּי צָחֲקִית:

The Sefas Emes, a Chassidish Rebbe from 19th century Poland, offers us a very deep understanding of these verses that will shed light into our Rosh Hashanah reading.

He notes that there have been many commentaries that ask this question. He explains:

Whether she was afraid or not, why would she feel she could deny her actions to the omniscient One, Hashem?

Was there a qualitative difference between the two laughters? Indeed, Targum Onkelos the divinely inspired Aramaic translation from the turn of the millennium written by a righteous Roman convert, subtly asserts different emotions behind each one's reaction. Onkelos' translation is known for hewing very carefully to the biblical Hebrew and rarely inserting extra words as other classic Biblical translations are wont to do. Surprisingly, he chooses two distinct Aramaic words for the same Hebrew root. For Avraham, Onkelos translates laughter as:

That of course Sarah immediately fixed her sin with repentance and by way of this repentance she erased the sin as if she had never laughed.

בפסוק ותכחש שרה
כו'. כי יראה כו' לא כי
צחקת. ותמהו כל
המפרשים האיך כחשה
שרה. ויש לפרש כי
בודאי שרה מיד תקנה
החטא בתשובה וע"י
תשובה נמחק החטא
כאלו לא צחקה
מעולם.

However, there is repentance from fear, and there is repentance from love. And by way of love, the sin is transformed into a merit.

אכן יש תשובה
מיראה ויש מאהבה
ועל ידי אהבה נהפך
החטא לזכות

And this is why it says that she denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," that is to say only that she feared.

וז"ש ותכחש לאמר לא
צחקתי היינו רק כי
יראה.

everyone who hears will laugh with me!" Rashi explains that "Many barren women were remembered with her; many sick people were healed on that very day; many prayers were answered with hers, and there was much joy in the world." We can almost feel the joy that was brought to the world through Sarah's extra effort to deepen her *teshuvah*.

But Avraham had the aspect of repentance from love and that is what is meant by, "no, but you laughed" meaning, that it is necessary to fix the laughter itself to be a merit.

אבל אברהם הי' בחי'
תשובה מאהבה וז"ש
לא כי צחקת פי'
שצריכין לתקן הצחוק
בעצמו להיות זכות

Perhaps Sarah received a bonus gift through her newfound appreciation of the different qualities of laughter. Indeed, the seventh time we see this root is in verse 9:

For that laughter was indeed necessary because it was because of this transformed laughter that he was called Yitzchak!

שהרי באמת הוצרך
הצחוק שעל שם זה
נק' יצחק

Sarah saw the son
whom Hagar the
Egyptian had borne to
Avraham metzacheik

והיא שרה את־בְּרָהֶגֶר
המצֻרֵית אֲשֶׁר־לָהּ
לְאִבְרָהָם מִצַּחֵק

In addition, afterwards, Sarah herself said (which is found in our Torah reading Chapter 21 verse 6) "G-d has made me laughter" behold she fixed the entire laughter to turn it into a merit!

וגם אח"כ אמרה שרה
בעצמה צחוק עשה לי
אלקים הרי שתיקנה
כל הצחוק להפכו
לזכות

It is unclear exactly what *metzacheik* means and what Yishmael was doing, although the *Midrashim* have plenty to say, but Sarah, due to her newfound insights into *tzchok*, laughter, was able to discern that it was not positive. Indeed, Onkelos translates it as *מְחִיִּיק*, the same Aramaic word for Sarah's pre-repentance laughter. Sarah knew that she would not be able to properly raise Yitzchak with this aspect of mockery in the house. Avraham, who was never challenged in the qualitative aspect of his laughter, was not able to see the negative attributes in his son. Perhaps this can help us understand the Talmudic dictum, "In a place where a *ba'al teshuvah* stands, even a full *tzaddik* cannot stand" (Brachot 34b). While Sarah was wrong in her reaction to Hashem's promise that she would have a son, it was clearly the deep introspection she did as a result of her misdeed that brought her to an even higher level of spirituality. Indeed, when Hashem exhorts Avraham to listen to Sarah in this matter, Rashi quotes the Midrash which tells us that "We learn from here that Avraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy."

The Sefas Emes explains that Sarah could honestly say she did not laugh as she erased her mocking disbelief of Hashem's capabilities through her *teshuvah meyirah*, repentance out of fear. Hashem, however, had much higher expectations for Sarah and her son. He knew that if Sarah recognized that she could plunge into deeper spiritual depths, she could transform that laughter into a merit, a rejoicing for the whole world. After thanking Hashem in our Torah reading for making this newly transformed laughter for her, Sarah says, כל-

As we approach this coming Rosh Hashanah, may we all reflect on our deeds of the past year and may we be worthy of turning all of our sins into merits to bring joy to ourselves, our families, and all of *Klal Yisrael*. May we see true joy enter the world speedily in our day.

והי' הכנה בחי' התשובה קודם לידת יצחק שלא הי'
באפשרי להיות קיום במדת הפחד של יצחק לכן הקדים
הקב"ה בחי' התשובה ונקרא יצחק שהוא מיתוק הדין
כמ"ש בזה"ק: